

Studying in English: Language Skills Development

by

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study carried out at AIS St Helens in Auckland, New Zealand to investigate the strategies used by international students for language skills development (LSD) in order that they can complete their studies in English. The study used a questionnaire to gather quantitative data and also interviews and observation to add a qualitative dimension. The findings highlight the importance of reading for the development of language skills and question the effectiveness of interactive classroom exercises. Implications of the findings for the teaching/learning situation are discussed.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the contribution to this study of the students who spent time filling out questionnaire forms and coming to be interviewed.

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Background

Since English has become an international language, it has become increasingly necessary for international students to develop the language skills required to study in English, and to evolve strategies to assist this development. Strategies, as the term applies to language development, have been hotly debated since the pioneering studies by Rubin (1975), Stern (1975) and Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco (1978) in the seventies, and they remain controversial (for a more thorough discussion of this controversy, see Griffiths, February 2004 on this website). Ehrman, Leaver and Oxford (2003) suggest that the term strategy implies movement towards a goal, and, in the case of the current study, the goal is language skills development (LSD). As applied to language, skills relate to the way language is used (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1992), and are traditionally conceived as consisting of reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Research Questions

The current study aimed to investigate the following questions:

1. Which LSD strategies or groups of strategies do students report using most frequently?
2. Is there any relationship between LSD strategy use and end-of-course scores?
3. Which LSD strategies do individual students report finding most useful?
4. How does observation of LSD strategy use compare with students' self-reported use?

Participants

The current study was undertaken at AIS St Helens, a private educational institute in Auckland, New Zealand. The participating students were working on a stage 2 Research Methods paper. Out of a class of 53 students, 32 international students returned the questionnaire. Approximately 60% were male and 40% were female and ages ranged from 22 to 36. After the publication of end-of-course results, the six students who achieved A passes were interviewed in order to explore the patterns of LSD use by individuals.

Instruments

In order to be able to compare data obtained by using different research methods, this study used three different instruments:

1. Questionnaire. The questionnaire developed for this study was divided into four sections according to the traditional four skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking). Ten statements were made regarding each skill, for

instance “I make summaries of what I read”, “I plan my writing before I start”, “I listen for key words”, “I plan in advance what I want to say”. Students were asked to rate each statement from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high) according to the frequency of use. Biographical details (gender, birth date, nationality, reasons for studying) were also asked for. (See Appendix A)

2. Interview guide. The interview guide was used to conduct semi-structured interviews with students who achieved an A pass at the end of the course. These students were asked about the strategies they had found most useful for developing skills in English, about which skills they had found most difficult, and about the strategies they had used to overcome these difficulties. Any other useful insights were also noted. (See Appendix B)
3. Observation guide. The observation guide was used by an observer during one of the regular class times. The guide asked for details of any instances of note taking, reading of handouts or other material, asking questions, talking to other students, using a dictionary, or any other behaviours which seemed to indicate that students were employing strategies to assist their language skills development. (See Appendix C).

Data Collection

Questionnaires were handed out to be completed in students’ own time and handed back at their convenience. The observation was carried out by a member of the academic staff during a normal class time and consisted of a lecture-style section during which the teacher spoke from the front of the class (15 minutes), followed by an interactive section during which students discussed questions with each other (also 15 minutes). Interviews were conducted with students who obtained an A pass who were invited to a semi-structured interview lasting about half an hour

Data Analysis

The questionnaire data were examined for mean frequency of reported LSD strategy use and correlations between reported frequency of LSD strategy use and end-of-course results (Spearman). The interview and observation data were subjected to a content analysis to investigate any useful insights relating to LSD strategy use by students.

Ethical Issues

It was important when carrying out this study that the rights of the students who participated were carefully protected. They were reassured that their responses to the questionnaire or their performance while being observed would have no bearing whatsoever on their grades for the course. Although the study was done in such a way as not to waste class time, and did not involve any expense on the participants’ part, it was made clear to the students that they had the right to participate or not as they saw fit, and, if they wished, to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants’ sensitivities were respected by wording questions about age, sex, nationality and

motivation in such a way as to avoid giving offence. Although it was necessary to ask for respondents' names in order to follow up after the questionnaire (making anonymity impossible), participants were assured that respondent details would not be made available to other than the researchers immediately involved in the project. Participants were informed of the nature of the project by means of a research information sheet (see Appendix D), and they were asked to sign a participation consent form (see Appendix E), thereby ensuring informed consent. While the study was in progress and after completion, the data storage has been according to the guidelines laid down by the institute

Results

According to the students' self-report, the most frequently used strategy item was Reading 10 ("I use a dictionary" - average=4.1, $R=.278$, $p=.123$), while the least frequently used item was Writing 9 ("I write a diary" - average=2.3, $R=-.315$, $p=.079$). Of the strategy groups, listening and speaking (both with average reported frequencies of use of 3.6) were reportedly the most frequently used.

Although the relationship between overall LSD strategy use and end-of-course results did not prove to be significant, a statistically significant relationship was found between reported frequency of reading strategies and end-of-course results ($R=.430$, $p<.05$). The individual strategy item most strongly correlated with end-of-course results was Reading 3 ("I find reading material at my level" - $R=.709$, $p<.01$). There were also significant correlations with two other reading strategies: Reading 1 ("I read extensively for information in the target language" - $R=.361$, $p<.05$) and Reading 6 ("I look for how a text is organised" - $R=.408$, $p<.05$). A significant correlation with end-of-course results was also found in the case of Speaking 9 ("If I do not know the vocabulary I want to use I use similar words or phrases" - $R=.402$, $p<.05$).

Of the 32 Research Methods students who returned a questionnaire, 6 obtained an A pass and came to an interview during which they were asked about their LSD strategy use. These students mentioned a variety of strategies they used to develop their language skills, and all six regarded reading as a key strategy, using it as a source of new vocabulary and as a model of correct grammar and usage to be applied across language modes (reading, writing, listening, speaking). Reading was also considered valuable because the reader has more control over the language input than is the case when listening, when much of the control is with the speaker.

During the lecture-style section of the lesson, students were observed to be relatively passive, taking notes, copying OHTs, reading handouts, occasionally checking dictionaries and underlining key points. They were reluctant to answer questions even when directly asked, and never volunteered questions or answers. During the interactive section of the lesson, however, students became much more animated, freely contributing ideas within their groups. This animation continued even after the teacher resumed control from the front of the class, when several students volunteered answers to the teacher's questions and others asked questions. The three students who got D passes, however, reported more frequent use of the strategy Speaking 8 ("I practise the target language with other students" - average=3.3) than did the A students (average=3.1).

Discussion

The finding that using a dictionary is reportedly the most frequently used of the strategy items in the questionnaire will probably come as no surprise to those who work in the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages. This frequently-used strategy, however, was not significantly correlated with end-of-course results, probably because it is so commonly used across students of all levels, and not only by either higher or lower level students.

At the other end of the frequency ratings, writing a diary is reportedly used least frequently, and is negatively correlated with end-of-course results (although the coefficient does not quite reach significance). This indicates that diaries as a skills development strategy are more frequently used by students who got lower end-of-course grades than by the more successful students. In the light of this finding, perhaps teachers might like to consider how useful this commonly-recommended strategy is for their students.

Although students report using listening and speaking strategies most frequently, it was reading strategies, which proved to be significantly correlated with end-of course success. Of the group of reading strategies, three (that is items 1, 3 and 6) proved to be significantly positively correlated with results. This result accords with the results of some other studies (for instance Ehrman and Oxford, 1995; Griffiths, 2002, 2003a, 2003b; Griffiths and Parr, 2000, 2001; Huang and van Naerssen, 1987), which emphasise the importance of reading when learning another language.

During the interviews, the A students suggested a varied list of the strategies which they found useful for themselves and which they used to cope with their difficulties with developing the skills they needed to study in English. These students all indicated finding reading a useful strategy because it expanded vocabulary and provided a model of correct grammar and usage, thereby assisting the development of both receptive (reading and listening) and productive (writing and speaking) skills.

The nature of the observed lesson (which involved firstly a lecture where students mainly listened and took notes and secondly an inter-student discussion) did not lend itself to further exploration of the use of reading strategies. However, the observation, which was made regarding interactivity, was interesting, especially when the students' reported use of the strategy of talking to other students and end-of-course results are compared. The finding that the less successful students report more frequent use of the strategy of interacting with other students might suggest that the commonly used communicative technique of getting students to discuss questions with each other might need to be treated with some caution by teachers in international classrooms.

Conclusion

Although relatively small scale, this study has produced some thought-provoking findings and raised some interesting questions. It would be useful to explore the relationship between use of reading strategies and end-of-course success with a larger sample, and also to investigate whether the positive relationship applies to a course

where reading skills might be expected to be less necessary, such as an oral communication course. Although the interviewees indicated a belief that reading was valuable even for the development of oral/aural skills, it would be useful to compare the results from such a course with the results of the present study in order to explore the degree to which this might or might not be the case. It would also be interesting, given the degree to which interactive exercises are used in contemporary classrooms, to design a study specifically to explore the effectiveness of such techniques in terms of learning outcomes, ensuring adequate numbers for reliable results.

In the light of the findings of this study, the two major recommendations would be firstly that, while interactive activities may provide variety and help to maintain interest in a classroom, the degree to which they promote learning may be less certain, and should therefore be used with some caution as a teaching technique. Secondly, educational institutions should invest in their libraries so that learners may make full use of a strategy which, according to this study, is positively related to learning success for international students studying their chosen subjects in English.

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Appendix A

NAME _____

LANGUAGE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

STRATEGY QUESTIONNAIRE

The following questionnaire contains some of the strategies which students report using in order to assist the development of skills in the language they are trying to learn. Please read the following strategy items and grade each one according to the frequency with which you use it

1.very low 2.low 3.medium 4.high 5.very high

READING SKILLS

- _____ 1. I read extensively for information in the target language
- _____ 2. I read for pleasure in the target language
- _____ 3. I find reading material at my level
- _____ 4. I use a library to obtain reading material
- _____ 5. I first skim read a text then go back and read it more carefully
- _____ 6. I look for how a text is organized
- _____ 7. I make summaries of what I read
- _____ 8. I make predictions about what I will read next
- _____ 9. I guess the approximate meaning by using clues from the context
- _____ 10. I use a dictionary to get the exact meaning

WRITING SKILLS

- _____ 1. I write letters or e-mails to friends in the target language
- _____ 2. When my mistakes are corrected, I learn from the corrections
- _____ 3. I write a variety of text types in the target language (e.g. notes, messages, lists)
- _____ 4. I plan my writing before I start
- _____ 5. If I cannot think of the correct expression I think of another way to express my meaning (e.g. synonyms)
- _____ 6. I use reference materials (e.g. a dictionary, thesaurus or grammar book) to check that what I am writing is correct
- _____ 7. If I am unsure about something I want to write I try to express my meaning and do not worry too much about correctness.
- _____ 8. I write a rough copy before writing a good copy
- _____ 9. I write a diary in the target language
- _____ 10. I get someone to proof read my writing

LISTENING SKILLS

- _____ 1. I attend out-of-class events where I can listen to the new language being spoken
- _____ 2. I use the media (e.g. radio, TV or movies) to practise my listening skills
- _____ 3. I listen to native speakers in public places (e.g. shops, restaurants, buses) and try to understand what they are saying
- _____ 4. I listen for key words which seem to carry most of the meaning
- _____ 5. I predict what the other person will say next based on context, background knowledge or what has been said so far
- _____ 6. I ask the speaker to slow down, repeat or clarify if I do not understand
- _____ 7. I avoid translating what I hear word-for-word
- _____ 8. I use the speaker's tone of voice, gestures, pauses or body language as a clue to meaning
- _____ 9. If I am unsure about meaning I guess
- _____ 10. I listen carefully to how native speakers pronounce the language I am trying to learn.

SPEAKING SKILLS

- _____ 1. I repeat new language to myself in order to practise it
- _____ 2. I seek out people with whom I can speak the target language
- _____ 3. I plan in advance what I want to say
- _____ 4. If I am corrected while speaking, I try to remember the correction and avoid making the same mistake again
- _____ 5. I ask questions
- _____ 6. I do not worry about correctness as long as I can communicate my meaning
- _____ 7. If necessary, I use gestures to convey my meaning and keep a conversation going
- _____ 8. I practise the target language with other students
- _____ 9. If I do not know the vocabulary I want to use, I use similar words or phrases
- _____ 10. I try to pronounce the target language like native speakers

BIODATA

M/F

BIRTHDATE: _____

NATIONALITY _____

WHY ARE YOU STUDYING _____

Are there any other strategies which you have found useful for developing the language skills you need for your study?

Appendix B

Interview guide

1. Which strategies have you found most useful for developing skills in English (key strategies)?

2. (a) Which skills have you found most difficult when learning English?

(b) Which strategies have you used to help overcome these difficulties?

3. Other

Appendix C

Observation guide

Dear Observer.

Please note down any instances which you observe of students using the following strategies:

- Note taking

- Reading handouts or other material

- Asking questions

- Talking to other students

- Using a dictionary

- Other

Appendix D

RESEARCH EXPLANATION SHEET

STRATEGIES FOR LANGUAGE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Dear research participant

I am Dr Carol Griffiths. I am studying the way students use language learning strategies in order to develop language skills.

If you agree to take part in this project, you will be involved in a three stage study.

Firstly, you will be asked to complete a questionnaire on your use of language learning strategies which should take you about 15 minutes.

In addition, the class will be observed during one of the lectures for language learning strategy use. Individual students will not be identified.

On a specified date, selected students will be asked to attend an interview

You may refuse to answer any question, leave the study at any time, or ask for more information. Any information given will be confidential and will not affect course results in any way.

Results of the study, recognising the contribution of the participants, will be sent out on request by e-mail, made available in the AIS library, and published on the Centre for Research in International Education (CRIE) website. They will also be presented at the AIS Conference on the Internationalisation of Education (August 2004).

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions

Yours sincerely

Dr Carol Griffiths

PHONE: 8151717/820

Appendix E

RESEARCH PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM

STRATEGIES FOR LANGUAGE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

I have read the explanation sheet for this study and have had the details explained to me. I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I also understand that I am free to leave the study at any time, or decline to answer any questions. I agree to provide information to the researchers and understand that any information I give will be confidential and will not affect my course results in any way.

Signed: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____